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Should virtual charter school experiment continue in NC?

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RALEIGH

North Carolina's two online charter schools are both considered low performing by the state, but the leaders of the schools say they should be allowed to stay open on a more permanent basis.

N.C. Connections Academy and the N.C. Virtual Academy are both in the third year of a four-year pilot program testing the concept of online charter schools, meaning they're open only until 2019 unless state lawmakers act. Nathan Currie,

“

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Nathan Currie, superintendent of Connections Academy

superintendent of Connections Academy, asked state lawmakers Tuesday to make the program permanent and to increase funding given to virtual charter schools.

Currie said some students and

teachers are reluctant to be at the virtual school since it could be closed in 2019.

“We're asking that this pilot status be looked at and ultimately removed because there are hundreds and even thou-

sands of kids and teachers that would benefit from our model,” Currie said.

Joel Medley, head of the Virtual Academy, didn't outright ask for the pilot program to be extended. But he told lawmakers that the academy was meeting state requirements that traditional charter schools would need to follow to get a full 10-year renewal.

Most members of the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee didn't give their opinion Tuesday about extending the virtual programs. But Rep. Larry Pittman, a Cabarrus County Republican, praised the

SEE PILOT, 5A

GOP HOUSE TAX BILL

Churches, nonprofits could delve into politics

BY WILLIAM DOUGLAS
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WASHINGTON

Not only would houses of worship be able to more actively promote political candidates, but so would nonprofit groups under a section inserted into the House tax bill an hour before it was due for a key vote.

The last-minute change affecting the so-called Johnson amendment was tucked into a 292-page “manager's amendment” to the GOP tax plan by House Ways and Means Committee Chair Kevin Brady, R-Texas. The House will vote on the entire tax plan this week. It's expected to pass easily.

The change pleased faith-based conservatives and infuriated campaign finance reformers and groups advocating separation of church and state.

“This would allow churches to become political organizations,” said Howard Gleckman, a senior fellow at the Tax Policy Center of the Urban Institute and Brookings Institution.

Faith-based groups had complained that Brady's initial attempt to alter the 1954 Johnson amendment, which bars churches and 501(c)(3) nonprofit groups from supporting or opposing political candidates, didn't go far enough and was too narrow because it didn't apply to tax-exempt nonprofit groups such as charities.

Brady's new language allows the nonprofit organizations to engage in political activities.

Under current Internal Revenue Service regulations, 501(c)(3) organizations must serve a public purpose, cannot benefit private interests, and are limited in the amount of political activity and lobbying they can do.

“We think it's important to be able to protect churches and pastors in the ability to endorse candidates, but we also think it's a matter of equity and fairness to allow all nonprofits to have free speech protections,” said David Christensen, Family Research Council vice president of government affairs. “They should be able to endorse, or not, as they see fit without the IRS threatening to punish them.”

SEE GOP TAX BILL, 4A



WILFREDO LEE AP

A last-minute addition to the House tax bill would make it easier for houses of worship to engage in political activity.

Faith leaders: ‘Thoughts and prayers’ first step to action



SCOTT OLSON Getty Images

Joshua John of Roanoke, Va., prays on Nov. 9 at a memorial where 26 crosses were placed to honor the victims killed at the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs in Texas. On Nov. 5, a gunman, Devin Patrick Kelley, shot and killed the 26 people and wounded 20 others.



DAVID J. PHILLIP AP

In Floresville, Texas, last Wednesday attendees pray during a prayer vigil for the victims of the Sutherland Springs First Baptist Church shooting.

■ After a tragedy, a backlash prompts some to say talking about ‘thoughts and prayers’ is meaningless. But faith leaders say faith and action go together.

BY MARTHA QUILLIN
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DURHAM

The mass shooting at a church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, on Nov. 5, started a repetition of a grim American ritual.

There is a mass shooting — 307 so far this year — followed by horror, grief and a social media offering of “thoughts and prayers” from elected officials, celebrities and regular folks.

But lately, a backlash also has followed, with some saying

the expression of “thoughts and prayers” is a hollow gesture. Gun-control advocates, in particular, interpret the once benign “thoughts and prayers” as code for “Not now, not ever” from politicians who don't act on implementing new gun-control restrictions.

Eventually, the shouting quiets down, but the division grows.

Many say that praying is far from a hollow gesture. Gathering with others to pray is seen as an especially powerful way to guide action so it can bring

SEE PRAYER, 5A

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